

Corporation for National and Community Service
Research Summit: Focus on Evidence
Working Session 3: Measuring and Assessing Civic Engagement in America
Summary of Discussion

Wednesday, December 16, 2015

1-2 p.m.

Washington, DC

INTRODUCTION

- Anthony Nerino of the Corporation for National and Community Service welcomed participants and explained the purpose and goals of the working session.
 - CNCS has reported on volunteering behavior in America for more than a decade. The Serve America Act encouraged CNCS to report on civic engagement, and CNCS also fielded a second supplement that measured civic health. CNCS continues to adjust it.
 - In 2010, due to concerns about the number of responses, CNCS sought input from the National Academy of Science to reevaluate data collection. Their report was issued in 2014, and CNCS has used it to make a number of recommendations.
 - Today's session is soliciting feedback on the question, "What are vital aspects of civic engagement that should be measured, and how should those measurements be used?"
- Dr. Andrea Robles of CNCS added that CNCS held a listening session with academics who brainstormed questions around civic engagement; those questions are listed in the one-page document about this session (and below). CNCS is hoping that concepts that come to the surface during this session will be incorporated as the organization moves forward next year.
- Anthony Nerino concluded by saying that the goal is to create a usable data set that can be combined with other measures to tell the story of civic engagement in this country—something that has greater utility and can be tested in many areas.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. There are some broad key concepts associated with civic engagement, including trust and confidence; volunteering (informal vs. formal); dialogue and discussion in the public sphere; moral and political engagement; public service/work; interaction with the media, as well as others. To increase knowledge in this field and to yield a unified picture of civic engagement in America, which concept(s) needs to be better understood and measured? What are the critical and ancillary indicators that could strengthen measurement?
2. For the concept(s) discussed, which data collection techniques and methods would be most appropriate for measuring and assessing civic engagement at the local, regional and national levels and across ethnicity, race and class?
3. What are the potential uses for the data? How useful are these metrics for local and national reporting? Are the measures and constructs feasible for examining trends in civic engagement?

Participants broke into four small groups and talked for 30-35 minutes, then reported back to the entire group.

REPORTING BACK

- Linda Manning, Arizona State University, moderated the 1st group and reported on their discussion.
 - There is no universal language explaining what civic engagement truly entails: is it talking to a neighbor, helping out a family member, or giving advice as a professional?
 - What does social media mean for civic engagement, and how can that activity be defined and captured? Does sending out a message with a hashtag count, and what is the link between social engagement and civic engagement—is it bringing people closer together civically, or making them lonelier?
 - Measuring age categorically is important, because civic engagement has a different meaning for different age groups. We also need to examine national vs. regional demographics.
 - Why aren't some people (roughly three-quarters of the population) civically engaged? How can we ensure that no one is marginalized?
 - How can civic engagement be built into K-12 school curriculums so that children become involved early on? Can corporations, with their money, power and reach, help?
- Robert Cox, CNCS, moderated the 2nd group and reported on their discussion.
 - How do trust and confidence in institutions, or in our political system, affect civic engagement, and how can that be measured? What about people's trust and confidence in their neighbors: does it vary depending on the population/demographic, and how would one capture that information? Universities might have GIS information that could be useful in that effort.
 - To better understand the roles that culture and experience play in people seeking out and signing up for volunteer opportunities, CNCS might examine a foster grandparents program that pairs older Americans with young kids.
 - Online habits and etiquette: someone might "like" a comment online that they wouldn't respond to in person; does it count as civic activism?
- Pamela Paxton, the University of Texas at Austin, moderated the 3rd group and reported on their discussion.
 - Capturing informal activities, like one neighbor helping another, is important when measuring civic engagement, as is capturing networks of relationships in a community.
 - What does it mean to get involved in a democratic system? Voting in local elections is important, and so is contacting public officials and attending town hall meetings.
 - It's important to be very specific and clear in the questions about these activities, so that everyone is on the same page.
 - Youth and seniors engage in different ways, and we need to understand them by age groups. It may be useful to look at people who think they are politically involved and find

out what they're doing: Do our definitions match their definitions? Are there age differences in what "politically involved" means?

- Elements that definitely should be part of a measure of civic health or engagement are volunteering, voting and networks of relationships.
- Arcela Nuñez-Alvarez, the National Latino Research Center at California State University San Marcos, moderated the 4th group and reported on their discussion.
 - It's helpful to have a clear definition of civic engagement, because our understandings can be very different.
 - We want to capture formal types of civic engagement, but it's also important to capture what's happening on the ground: activities that emerge at the grassroots and move up. What are more informal types of activities that we haven't captured in the past: for example, where does protest fit?
 - We could view civic engagement as a spectrum and look at it in phases or stages: What is the initiation of civic engagement, the motivators that get us started, and when does that begin? In addition, we might examine persistence over time: retention and how it changes across the lifespan (getting data as people age). And how do we measure the quality of civic engagement?
 - It's also important to look at various levels of engagement. Are there some activities that can only be captured at the local level, or are specific to one place? Look at what is unique to the community, and find a way to connect those local levels with national-level trends.
 - We may need to do a better job of documenting the infrastructure of civic engagement: that is, how many community-based organizations exist in a specific community and the opportunities for engagement.
 - Can civic engagement be linked to other institutions and entities to create more synergy? For example, there is a very direct connection between civic engagement and the arts; how are we linking these things?
 - Who is involved? What are the demographics: ethnicity, race, class—and age? Many of us work with high school students and college students; what could help us better understand civic engagement among that population?
 - New issues have been raised with social media: how do we understand civic engagement through these means, and does it raise more questions?
 - All of these points are linked together by culture. Having this data will be important: it will help us better understand trends locally and nationally, and can be used in policy discussions.

Session adjourned at 2:10 p.m.

Corporation for National and Community Service
Research Summit: Focus on Evidence
Working Session 3: Measuring and Assessing Civic Engagement in America
Summary of Discussion

Wednesday, December 16, 2015

2:15-3:15 p.m.

Washington, DC

INTRODUCTION

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 - CNCS has reported on volunteering behavior in America for more than a decade. The Serve America Act required CNCS to report on civic engagement, and CNCS also fielded a second supplement that measured civic health. CNCS continues to adjust it.
 - In 2010, due to concerns about money and the number of responses, CNCS sought input from the National Academy of Science (NAS) to reevaluate data collection. Their report was issued in 2014, and CNCS used it to make a number of recommendations.
 - CNCS drafted a new instrument to measure civic health as part of civic engagement and social capital, and has held several listening efforts to solicit feedback. This is the third.
 - Today's session seeks responses on the question, "What are vital aspects of civic engagement that should be measured, and how should those measurements be used?"
- Dr. Andrea Robles of CNCS added that while the main focus of this working session is to generate ideas for the survey, CNCS is also an agency that makes research grants, and today's responses could contribute to their direction, as well.
- Anthony Nerino concluded by saying that CNCS uses the Current Population Survey, a large sample that cannot access neighborhood-level information, but is interested in tapping into local-level data and open to suggestions about how to get to it.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

4. There are some broad key concepts associated with civic engagement, including trust and confidence; volunteering (informal vs. formal); dialogue and discussion in the public sphere; moral and political engagement; public service/work; interaction with the media, as well as others. To increase knowledge in this field and to yield a unified picture of civic engagement in America, which concept(s) needs to be better understood and measured? What are the critical and ancillary indicators that could strengthen measurement?
5. For the concept(s) discussed, which data collection techniques and methods would be most appropriate for measuring and assessing civic engagement at the local, regional and national levels and across ethnicity, race and class?
6. What are the potential uses for the data? How useful are these metrics for local and national reporting? Are the measures and constructs feasible for examining trends in civic engagement?

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REPORTING BACK

- Jim Witte, Institute for Immigration Research at George Mason University, moderated the 1st group and reported on their discussion.
 - There are different types of engagement; the word “civic” seems particularly political, and some of the measures that have been traditionally used, like voting, describe the activity in a very specific political way. But what about the social sphere, or the community?
 - Why are people engaged? Is it to deliver their choice, or because they have nothing better to do, or because they are between school or jobs? If you are really trying to get people engaged, you might not care why, and might appeal to whatever motivation gets it done—i.e., illustrating that helping at a small nonprofit can lead to the acquisition of skills and experience that can then lead to other jobs.
 - Are we measuring individuals, or the strength of a community?
 - Voting and philanthropy aren’t listed in Question #1. For the latter, how do we compare people like Mark Zuckerberg with those who don’t have the means, but do want to give?
 - Alternative means to measure engagement: what about people simply getting along with one another, or “neighborhood watch” groups? Are the people who are most engaged also the easiest to reach? And to what degree are some people not allowed or unable to be engaged—for example, based on where a meeting might be held?
 - Examining the counterfactuals could also be useful: finding a community in a place with a reputation for being very civic minded—Salt Lake City, for example—and talking with those who are not very engaged; and also going to a place with a low level of engagement, like Flint, Mich., and studying those who are very engaged.
- Kristi Tate, National Conference on Citizenship, moderated the 2nd group and reported on their discussion.
 - How do we make sure that we capture the full set of civic activities? For example, looking at gender, there might be certain roles in a community that people identify differently; how do you capture people’s different perceptions of them? Similarly, in rural communities, there might not be a formal infrastructure, but farmers who otherwise wouldn’t volunteer might help other farmers who fall ill.
 - There are distinctions between online and offline engagement that present challenges. There are many new online paths to engagement, but are people now so inundated with opportunities that it is hard to focus on one cause or way of getting involved? And are people using social media to interact mostly with like-minded people?
 - How do public work and public service fit in? People might spend 50 hours per week working for a nonprofit, but it doesn’t count as a “volunteer” activity.
 - Motivation issues: How do we better understand why and how people are getting involved, and their paths afterwards? And what are the barriers we can then address to get

- people involved? Organizations like Paths of Light have done studies on this; how do we draw on those resources?
- Uses of data: When communities rank very poorly, reactions can sometimes be used to light a fire, but the rankings can also demonstrate gaps in research. For example, Alabama might rank low in some areas, but the faith-based picture might be left out. How do we represent the entire story? It's important to think about the connections between these behaviors and to understand different pathways to engagement.
- Rachael Weiker, National Conference on Citizenship, moderated the 3rd group and reported on their discussion.
 - The best way to understand trust and confidence in institutions is still not clear, and measuring behaviors is tough; that might be too much for this survey, but we might be able to go to other organizations that are collecting national data in a more suitable way.
 - How do we share the value proposition of understanding civic engagement and get people to buy into why we need more of it? We could dive into existing research to tie into relevant numbers and scores that people, especially policymakers, are looking at—for example, test scores, unemployment figures, or data on economic resiliency. How do you point out that greater civic participation, or helping immigrants become citizens, increases the tax base? We need to keep making that argument.
 - That dialogue needs to get into the public sphere in a way that's actionable. Getting groups that are not already willing to participate is a huge challenge to overcome. There are many different voices that are not necessarily being heard. How do we get them into the room and convince them that they will be heard? How do we get other groups that do not normally hear them to come into the room, too? One key solution is going to those communities ourselves. We need to be in that community—making noise, making it social—to get that participation.
 - It is important to leverage people at a young age. They are a hard entry point, but can take the message out to the tech networks and to their friends and family in a really effective way. We need to start early. We also need to get a better handle on the depth and breadth of connections that youth are building through social media, and understand how they are leveraging them.
 - Marisol Clark-Ibáñez, California State University San Marcos, moderated the 4th group and reported on their discussion.
 - How do you get at “helping” behavior? Questions might include, “Would you do this?” or “When was the last time you helped a neighbor in the last six months?” It has to be something that gets at these smaller indicators, at a micro level, and paints a more nuanced picture.
 - It is important to differentiate between volunteers who are paid and those who are not. And as practitioners, how do you make sense of the data?
 - Data can be very powerful, especially for recruitment. Always have a story about data—its impact, or how it is used.
 - Measuring the civic engagement of hard-to-reach populations is tricky. For example, immigrants might not go into volunteerism or service once they become citizens because

they have to work. It's a serious concern: people doing national service are often paid low wages. How does that affect retention, and how do we get at that material reality? The level of reimbursement has implications for who volunteers or doesn't.

- How do we serve immigrant populations, and how can we collect more data on them?
- What draws someone to be civically engaged, and how can we get at that motivation—i.e., the behavioral aspects—in data collection?
- Does military service count as “national service,” and are veterans being captured in the data?